

Read Archbishop Justin's Easter message for BBC Local Radio

The Gospel of St John, chapter 20, begins: "On the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb."

On the first day. While it was still dark.

After a winter of getting up and going to work when it still feels like night-time, many of us will enjoy waking up when the day has already arrived.

We don't see clearly in the dark. Shadows become monsters. Noises feel like a threat. But just because we don't see things doesn't mean we don't experience them - it means our understanding is distorted. A child is certain a creak under the bed is a monster. A person hears a noise, and worries they are being robbed.

Mary sees the empty tomb, and alone in the darkness she comes to the obvious conclusion: Jesus's body has been stolen. Even in death, it seems, there are greater depths to plumb, further defeat, further robbing of dignity.

When we stand by the tomb with Mary, the darkness feels never-ending. We see signs of death everywhere: when civilians are murdered in Ukraine. When children starve to death in Yemen. When Afghans face famine, are forced to flee, and the girls stripped of their rights to education. When loved ones die of Covid and climate change threatens the lives and livelihoods of people around the world, we feel like hostages to the grave. It is impossible to believe that the light will come.

So sometimes, to close our eyes might feel safer for those of us sitting safely at home. In the light of the risen Christ, we will have to look at our own sin and the unbearable suffering of others that calls us inescapably - to act. We hardly dare hope for the restoration and renewal that light can also bring, because it will mean challenging ourselves, perhaps changing our lives and our preconceptions completely.

We know that the dead stay dead. Jesus's followers knew this too. The unnamed disciple, the one whom Jesus loves, stands outside the tomb, looking at the physical signs of death. He sees the linen that wraps the corpse. He sees the tomb, the burial place. He sees the mourning women.

And yet the linen is discarded. The stone is rolled back. The body is gone. Nothing is as it seems.

Perhaps we see signs of hope, but still, we stand with the bloodied grave clothes, rather than go in and see the empty tomb for ourselves. Like a child in the darkness must confront the monster under its bed to see the truth, we must go into the tomb today, confront death, to see its emptiness and evil, to see its defeat. The disciple Jesus loves, sees, and believes.

God's message is made known to the confused, the grieving and the forgotten. Those without status in the eyes of the world are valued and welcomed. Those who mourn will be consoled and those who are fearful will be comforted, because our saviour does not turn his back on suffering, but bears it for us, and so transforms it.

Whilst it was still dark in the world, Jesus had already risen. And the first day, a new creation, had already begun.

Alleluia! Christ is risen indeed!

3 min read

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